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It is time to know

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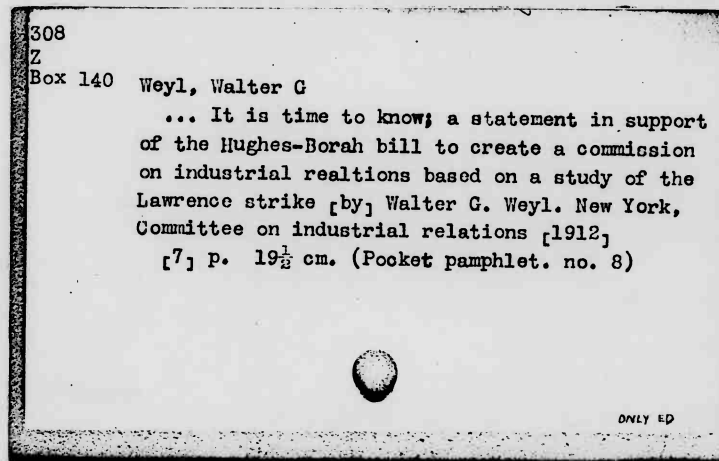
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It is Time to Know

*A Statement in Support of the Hughes-Borah Bill
to Create a Commission on Industrial Relations
Based on a Study of the Lawrence Strike*

WALTER G. WEYL

Published by the
Committee on Industrial Relations

Room 607 Kent Hall
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Oct 1, 1923

It is Time to Know

Walter G. Weyl

The strike at Lawrence bade us to "stop, look and listen." It was no ordinary strike, and it did not convey an ordinary message. It was a flaming appeal to the conscience and intelligence of the American people.

I return from Lawrence with many ideas, clear and confused. I bring back questions which I can not answer. I have asked these questions of other men and they have no answer.

In the first place why did the strike begin with violence? Why was the moving spirit of the leaders one of revolution instead of the cautious, bargaining spirit of the ordinary trade-union? What caused the desperation of some of these strikers, and the haunting fear of some of these mill-owners? Did the mill-owners understand the minds and souls of the men and women who stand at their looms?

It is significant of the Lawrence strike that the men behind it had no faith in the justice of our citizenry. They had no faith in public opinion. "If your little Johnnie or your little Jennie" declaimed one of the leaders "comes to you and asks for shoes or bread, will you be content to say 'I have no money for shoes or bread but public opinion is with us'?" The strike leaders seemed to believe "Better an ounce of working class revolt than oceans of public sympathy." Why was this?

For the sovereign state of Massachusetts the strike-leaders had as little respect. I witnessed in Lawrence a certain conference between the strike-leaders and a volunteer investigating committee of the state legislature. The committee was thrown upon the defensive. "What can your state do?" asked the strike-leaders. "If you find



one party wrong, can your state force it to do right? Can you legislators be impartial as arbitrators, when you have not lived the bitter life of the workers? Would you arbitrate a question of life and death, and are the worst wages paid in these mills anything short of death? Do you investigate because conditions are bad, or because the workers broke loose and struck? Why did you not come *before the strike?*"

It is easy to answer that these strike-leaders are incendiaries, anarchists, revolutionists. But that is no answer. Why do the mass of peaceful workmen and workwomen follow such leaders? What conditions have we allowed to grow up in Massachusetts and in other states to render such an allegiance possible or conceivable? Why do Haywood and Ettor lead, and where are the wise and patriotic citizens of Massachusetts?

When you attend the strike meetings at Lawrence you gain some insight into the reason for this leadership. I was at one meeting of the strikers, at which fifteen thousand men and women were gathered on the muddy Lawrence Common, and speeches were made in Syrian, Italian, German and perhaps a dozen other languages. I saw in this plain of upturned white faces that mask of infinite patient resignation which is so tragic a mark of the peasant face in Eastern and Southern Europe. I saw also a new obscure enthusiasm, a new halting self-confidence breaking through the mists of apathy. The souls behind these white faces were beginning to stir. The minds behind these white faces were beginning to think. They were beginning to think collectively. They were asking, "Why?"

Had these men asked, "Whom shall we follow, if not these revolutionary leaders?" we should have been hard put to it to answer. We might have replied "There is the peaceful union of textile workers, affiliated with the American Federa-

tion of Labor." But the United Textile Workers have been crushed by the manufacturers of Lawrence; they have been beaten and almost destroyed in the crash of industrial battle. We might have advised them to apply to the state governor. But the governor has no power. We might have advised an appeal to public opinion. But public opinion has been deaf and blind these many years to the conditions at Lawrence—and elsewhere. Public opinion is powerful when it is well informed. It is impotent when it is ignorant.

A few months ago we knew nothing about the conditions at Lawrence. We did not know the wages of the mill-hands. We do not know yet. We did not know their conditions, their aspirations. We do not know yet.

Wander through the alleys and byways of Lawrence and you will understand why the peaceful mill-workers were content with a leadership more profoundly revolutionary than any in the history of American labor. The mill-hands are for the most part foreigners. One race has supplanted another at the mills, only to make place for a third. We do not know how many nationalities are represented there. We do not know how many languages are spoken, or what these mill-workers say and think in their languages. We do not know.

The environment of these immigrants, lured to Lawrence from Italy and Portugal, from Poland and Russia, from Turkey and Greece, is very different from what we Americans consider an American environment. Most of these workers are better off than they were in their native lands; many are worse off, but all of them are very remote from an environment conducive to the best American citizenship.

What is the bond, the nexus, between American public opinion and the men and women who

huddle in the creaking, dilapidated shanties in the worst streets of Lawrence? These future American citizens suffer no wrong in the well-lighted, well-kept mills, except that their wages are low. They are told that this is the law of supply and demand. Their landlords are not cruel, except that they, like the grocers and the butchers, are always raising prices. The mill-workers are told that this too is the law of supply and demand. They are not bothered by the city or the state governments, except for an occasional kick or curse, but they receive little from either, and know little of either. They only know that the policeman carries a club. Our American public opinion passes over the heads of these people, and does not stop to see their conditions, let alone to understand them. We do not know. We do not seem to care to know.

The strike leaders were not far from wrong when they asked the legislators *"Why did you not come before the strike?"* If the Lawrence strike teaches one lesson more clearly than another it is that the people of the United States *must know*.

We must understand for Lawrence and for all the industrial communities of America the real facts about labor. We must know wages, hours, conditions, everything which is necessary to form the basis of an intelligent judgment. We shall have no time to discuss fire protection when the house is already ablaze. We must know in advance.

Lawrence is not alone nor is Massachusetts. We are equally ignorant of equally evil conditions elsewhere. Are we to postpone our investigations until the steel mills are attacked and the railroads tied up? Are we to bury our head in the sand and plead ignorance afterwards? Are we to be held guiltless of all complicity because we did not know?

When the next great labor conflict arrives, the "innocent public" will complain that it has again to suffer from a contest which it has not evoked. As heretofore the public at the eleventh hour will seek to investigate, to know, to understand. But it is then always too late, for in an industrial battle neither contestant can see clearly or speak truly. The innocent public will again be bewildered, and will again pay the penalty.

But is the public innocent of a conflict, if it allows the conditions to arise which produce the conflict? And is the nation without responsibility if it does not even seek to know?

The Lawrence strike teaches us that the time has come for a new approach to the problems underlying industrial conflicts and for the elimination of such of their causes as are preventable. The federal government should summon a commission of the wisest, most public spirited and best informed citizens to re-examine, in the words of President Taft, "our laws bearing upon the relation of employer and employe" and to "inquire into the general conditions of labor in our principal industries; into the existing relations between employers and employes in those industries; into the various methods which have been tried for maintaining mutually satisfactory relations between employes and employers, and for avoiding or adjusting trade disputes; and into the scope, methods, and resources of Federal and State bureaus of labor and the methods by which they might more adequately meet the responsibilities which, through the work of the commission above recommended, would be more clearly brought to light and defined."

For half a century we have blundered through a succession of fatuous errors because we did not know. It is time to know.

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